



africa special: the big picture



To save Africa we must listen to it

Their fault or our fault? The blame game doesn't help. More important is our attitude: we must now acknowledge that Africa will make its own future. By **RICHARD DOWDEN**

On the eve of the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Omdurman in 1998, I asked the British ambassador to Sudan whether he was prepared to apologise at next day's memorial ceremony. It was barely a battle, more of a slaughter in which British howitzers and Maxim guns killed and wounded some 27,000 Sudanese. There were 175 British casualties. "Yes, of course," he replied, "but then we'd also have to apologise for building the roads, the schools, the hospitals and the university, setting up the government institutions and creating a nation state called Sudan."

Two opposing narratives inform our understanding of Africa. The first tells of a continent undeveloped and underpopulated until Europeans discovered it and opened it up to trade and the benefits of science and civilisation. Until outsiders came, sub-Saharan Africa had no writing and no wheel. Its inhabitants belonged to thousands of ethnic groups which, outside the West African Islamic kingdoms, ruled themselves according to custom. Once colonial rule had been established, Africa's population leapt from 120 million in 1880 to 165 million in 1935. With the benefits of peace, stability, western education and science, it rose to 330 million by the 1960s. The colonialists left Africa's economies in reasonable shape, but after independence they sank back into anarchy and poverty. The cause: tribalism and corruption.

The other narrative goes like this: the continent flourished until

Europeans started prowling around its coasts in the 16th century looking for loot. The loot they found was human – slaves – and over the next two and a half centuries, millions of Africans were ripped from their land and shipped across to the Americas to labour in mines and on plantations. That impoverished Africa and made Europe wealthy. The slave-trade wealth was invested in Europe, creating the industrial revolution. This in turn gave Europe a further advantage over Africa and a sense of superiority which Europeans interpreted as racial. That gave the impetus for imperialism and colonialism. Europe carved up Africa so it could more easily exploit Africa's mineral wealth and cheap labour.

Then, after most of Africa won political independence in the 1950s and 1960s, Europe kept its former colonies dependent and continued to manage the international trading system to its own advantage and against Africa's. As part of the cold-war divide, appalling dictators were propped up because they were "our" dictators. Furthermore, the western powers bound Africa's economies to them through loans that in time became unpayable, at the same time giving a pittance in aid to individual African countries. Those loans, this narrative says, are modern slavery. The thread in the cord that binds Africa in poverty and weakness is made in Europe and it is strong and long-lasting.

The first, colonial, narrative pretty much informs British government policy to this day – as recently as January, Gordon Brown



Whose burden? Europeans tend to see Africans, such as these Mozambicans mourning 190 people killed in a train crash, solely as victims of war, disaster and poverty

said that Britain had nothing to apologise for from its colonial past. The second narrative induces post-imperial guilt and drives the aid industry. In Africa, you often hear the first rather than the second, evidence perhaps that the most damaging effect of imperial rule was not political or economic but psychological. It destroyed Africa's belief in its past and itself.

There are elements of truth in both narratives. The ambassador's dilemma was real. For ill and good, Europe and Africa are deeply intertwined. And yet, despite two world wars and a Depression between them, Europe has prospered while African countries fill all the bottom places in the league table that measures the quality and length of human life.

Europe's historical impact on Africa cannot alone explain Africa's failure to function and prosper. The thread that bound Europe to Africa also bound it to parts of Asia and South America. But no one in India or Argentina would claim that their nation's shortcomings today were a result of colonialism – not directly, anyway. They are bigger than their history and have come to terms with the past. Europe's imprint on Africa was, on the surface, quicker and lighter than in both Asia and Latin America, yet Africa is perceived to have suffered so much more.

And in the post-colonial period the global trading system has been the same for Asia and Africa. How, for example, has Vietnam, a country that has suffered more than a bit from colonialism

and neo-imperialism, become one of the world's most successful coffee producers, elbowing aside established African growers, whose production has stagnated?

Despite colonialism, Africa remains powerfully itself, moulded by its harsh environment. To give three examples: its uncertain climate and virulent diseases make its societies conservative, more concerned with short-term survival than minded to take risks for long-term development. The lesson learned is that you

The continent's spirituality gives it a certain fatalism, but also resilience and solidarity in harsh times

keep to traditions and respect your elders because they have experience and wisdom. Africa's two most stable and vibrant democracies, Ghana and Kenya, have both chosen conservative old men, not dynamic young ones as presidents. Second, family and a sense of belonging are more important than individualism. No man is an island. And third, Africa is altogether a more spiritual place, strongly aware of deeper forces in the world than the price of bread. That gives it a certain fatalism but also immense ►

► resilience and solidarity in harsh times.

These elements all play in making Africa what it is today, but the key to understanding Africa's situation in a global context lies in its politics and in the relationship between its elite and the outside world. Africa's elites and their European allies have played a crucial role in the impoverishment of the continent, from the time of the coastal kings of West Africa who caught and sold slaves to the slave-traders in the 18th century, through the African armies that helped the Europeans conquer Africa in the 19th, and on to the ruling elite today who put their ill-gotten gains in London banks.

But why should Africa's elite ruling class have served the continent so badly? The Europeans ruled for long enough to destroy or undermine Africa's own power structures, but too briefly to replace them with other political structures that united the people in nation states. Africans had had no part in creating the states that were suddenly handed to them at independence along with European-designed flags and national anthems.

There was no return to traditional systems of rule because the colonial-created states bore no relation to previous political or economic entities, although at local level, kings and chiefs have retained significant influence. Power was seized from the departing Europeans by those whom the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe called "the smart, the lucky and hardly ever the best". They held on to it whatever the cost – even if it meant destroying their country. Robert Mugabe is not untypical of the dictators who ruled in Africa's first four decades.

But the problem goes deeper than poor leadership, lack of elections and bad policies. It lies in the shape of African states. The Europeans created them by drawing lines on the map, cutting across ethnic groups, cramming them into artificial borders. Most of these European-created entities have at least a dozen languages; Nigeria has three huge language groups and more than 400 other tongues. Imagine if Europe, which has only 20 languages, had to elect one centralised government. And imagine if the French were Muslim and the only wealth was oil and it was under the Germans. In the light of what history suggests Europeans might make of such a predicament, Africa is quite a peaceful continent.

Africans are trapped between their own past and imported



Railroad to nowhere: refugees flee Rwanda on a train bound for Kinsangani, Congo

western political systems and could not, until recently, integrate the two strands of their history. On the surface, Africa has the trappings of states, governments and institutions recognisable worldwide. Beneath the surface, old networks still rule.

That is why although almost all African countries have elected leaders these days, the problems continue. Even without those networks and pre-colonial allegiances, however, Africa's states do not have administrative structures that reach from the government to the people. Even if governments are committed to delivering books to schools or drugs

to clinics, few outside Botswana or South Africa could deliver them. There is simply a lack of human capacity and infrastructure.

So how should we relate to Africa today? Policies – a fairer trade system, less debt – are important, but more important is attitude. First, acknowledge, and not just with lip-service, that Africa will make its own future. Even among the most politically correct modern Europeans, Africans can spot traits of thought inherited from imperial forebears. Because our image of Africans is one of poverty and victimhood, we also think they are weak. We want to

save Africa, so we do not think to understand or listen to it.

Second, history is important, as was painfully illustrated by the UK government's handling of Zimbabwe. Jack Straw, Clare Short and Tony Blair thought they could bawl Mugabe into

submission from the moral high ground. History had moved on, they said, claiming Britain's responsibility for Zimbabwe ended at Lancaster House in 1979. But every bolt they threw at Mugabe was returned with even more force. And like it or not, Africans appreciated his stand against British public bullying. The megaphone policy failed and it also wrecked the relationship between Blair and South Africa's president, Thabo Mbeki, crucial for British policy in Africa. These mistakes were made because the government did not bother to study African attitudes.

I hope the Commission for Africa persuades the rest of the world to adopt some good new – or old – ideas for supporting the continent. But nothing happens quickly in Africa. Do not expect quick results. That is the third lesson. It will take decades.

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